

I. Executive Summary

As part of ongoing preservation efforts for the Lincoln Memorial, a cultural landscape report was initiated in March 1996 to gain a better understanding of the landscape surrounding the Lincoln Memorial grounds. A cultural landscape report provides information about the physical development of a site and evaluates the significance and integrity of the existing landscape based on the period of significance. The period of significance is the time in which the property achieved the qualities that make the landscape eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. For the Lincoln Memorial grounds, the period of historical significance is from 1914 to 1933, during which time landscape plans were implemented and completed. A set of general design guidelines, based on the historic landscape and present-day maintenance requirements for the grounds, is also presented. These landscape guidelines provide critical information for park managers to use in making future maintenance and preservation decisions.

Documentation and evaluation of the grounds of the Lincoln Memorial were planned by the National Park Service early on but were accelerated when modifications to historic site features were presented to the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation in 1994. These changes were proposed to bring the site up to current accessibility standards.

Originally, the intent of the cultural landscape report was to focus only on the grounds immediately surrounding the Lincoln Memorial, but after further investigations, it was determined that the study boundaries should be extended. Because the Lincoln Memorial foundation plantings are part of a larger designed landscape within West Potomac Park that includes the Reflecting Pool, Rainbow Pool, radial roads, and Watergate area, the boundaries were extended to include these areas. For this document, this entire area of study will be called the “Lincoln Memorial grounds.”

This distinct formal landscape for the Lincoln Memorial grounds was initially conceived by the McMillan Commission in 1901. Subsequent plans developed by noted landscape architects, architects, and engineers between 1914-1933, the period of historical significance, further defined the simple geometric spaces that would extend the mall axis and honor Abraham Lincoln. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Charles McKim, Henry Bacon, James Greenleaf, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers all made significant contributions to the design and execution of the plans for the Lincoln Memorial grounds.

Implementation of the design and management of the finished landscape was originally under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and then was transferred to the National Park Service in 1933. Soon after the transfer, the National Park Service initiated changes in management and character of the landscape. Since 1933 increases in visitation and changes in land use have adversely affected what remains of the historic landscape from 1914 to 1933. Some of these changes are minor and are reversible, but other changes will take more effort to correct or are simply irreversible due to current needs.

Even with some of the changes, much of the original design for the Lincoln Memorial grounds, as implemented between 1914 and 1933, is evident today. Because of the importance of the Lincoln Memorial and of the potential impacts to the site by proposed

development, it was critical to document the landscape at a level that would satisfy park managers. This cultural landscape report will not only assist park managers, but also guide the Commission of Fine Arts and other preservation groups in their efforts to manage and preserve the historic designed landscape of the Lincoln Memorial for the future.